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ABSTRACT

A problem solving procedure known as the Tab Item was used with 21 undergraduate education majors who minored in reading to give the students an opportunity to apply their knowledge in a nonthreatening environment. The problem solving activity centered on a hypothetical fourth grade teaching position that opened at midyear. The students were told that they had been hired to fill the position and had one week to work in the classroom, visit with the "principal," and look over records. During this time they had to determine how to strengthen the reading instruction in this hypothetical classroom. Students were also given questions about specific hypothetical students in the "classroom" whose reading needs had not been met adequately by the previous "teacher." Student reactions to this experience indicated that (1) the experience promoted interaction among the participants, (2) participation in the activity gave students the opportunity to apply knowledge while still in the college classroom, (3) the class discussion gave the instructor an opportunity to give guidance in the application of theory in a training situation prior to entry into an actual classroom, (4) students gained confidence in their ability to teach reading, and (5) anxiety about entry into the classroom as a reading teacher was reduced. (HOD)

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TAB ITEM: ASSESSING STUDENTS' APPLICATION OF READING THEORY

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TAB ITEM: ASSESSING STUDENTS' APPLICATION OF READING THEORY

by

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Perhaps the most significant studies which have substantiated the necessity for improved teacher education in reading were the Harvard-Carnegie reports of the early 1960's. These reports called for upgrading the pre-service and in-service training of teachers. The first Harvard report, The Torch Lighters (Austin, 1961), examined the collegiate preparation of prospective teachers of reading and concluded that the graduating students were not always adequately trained to undertake the responsibility of helping children master the printed word. The report also stated that development of reading concepts must be associated with real life situations to enable the college student to make the necessary transfer from theory to practice.

The Torch Lighters report also indicated a dissatisfaction with methods used in evaluating pre-service teachers. A well-constructed objective test, although valuable in assessing objectives attained in a course, had limited usefulness in assessing the process the teacher goes through in applying theory in a classroom. Results indicated that college instructors felt time constraints prohibited them from evaluating students in the way they preferred--observation in the classroom. Rather, they had to rely on written examinations covering only mastery of theory. One recommendation resulting from this study was to make use of the case study or problem-solving approach in order to give students the opportunity to apply theory to problems and ultimately to solve the problem.

The second Harvard study, The First R (Austin, 1963), was made with the purpose of ascertaining the conduct and content of the reading programs found in elementary schools throughout the country. The study criticized reading courses as being too theoretical and impractical, and concluded that content was too removed from realistic situations encountered in a classroom. The study recommended in part that the content and conduct of undergraduate courses in reading be revised to include the practical application of theory.

There have been attempts to develop instruments which require students to apply knowledge in a problem-solving situation regarding reading. Eugene W. Wade (1960) developed and validated a test that assessed teachers' application of reading knowledge. Burnett (1961) attempted to strengthen Wade's test, which he felt was product-based and placed no emphasis on process concerning how the solution was obtained. Burnett felt evaluation should measure the efficiency of the teacher in solving problems and include the number of errors, corrections, and the sequence of steps used to solve the problem. On the basis of the results of his study, Burnett recommended that teacher training courses include experiences which give students the opportunity to use diagnostic procedures. He also suggested that the use of the case study approach to solving classroom problems was superior to evaluation which measures the amount of factual information possessed by the students.

Along this line Nichols (1978) developed and validated a remedial reading problem-solving instrument which was a modification of a procedure called Tab Item. A Tab Item instrument was a procedure used by the Air Force to measure the proficiency of a mechanic in maintaining a radar-computer system. The procedure provided a simulated malfunction within the system and a list of all possible tests which could be performed to find its cause. Accompanying each test, hidden under a tab (hence the name), was a verbal or diagrammatic description of the results the exam would obtain if the procedure was actually performed. Examinees were instructed to select any check or series of checks necessary to make a diagnosis and to be as efficient as possible (Glaser, Damrin, and Gardner, 1952). Nichols modified this technique to assess graduate level reading education students' abilities to diagnose reading problems in children. The students were asked to perform a diagnosis on a hypothetical child. Information was provided which contained the names of tests and procedures that could realistically be available for use by a remedial reading teacher in an actual school situation. The procedures and tests listed included a range from very relevant to the diagnosis of the problem and placement to those that were quite

irrelevant. Concealed next to each procedure or test were the results as they related to the hypothetical child consistent with his/her problem. If the examinee decided the test or procedure would be beneficial to "administer," a paper covering the result had to be torn off. Once the covering was removed, the test was considered to be "given." It was the student's task to choose correctly the best set of tests and procedures to identify the instructional needs of the "child." The student's performance was compared to procedures used by a panel of experts in diagnosing the needs of the hypothetical child.

One conclusion of this study was that the experience would be more valuable if the students would be forced to rely on their own knowledge rather than being provided with a list of tests and procedures available for their use. In later modifications of the Tab Item technique, students were not given the alternatives. Instead, they were required to determine what step should be taken, ask the administrator of the activity for the results of having taken that step, and then decide on the next step to take. Nichols used this modified procedure to assess reading/study skills abilities of high school and freshman college students and to assess graduate level reading students.

As the procedure was used, it was found to be more useful as a teaching technique than as a testing instrument. It seemed advantageous to use the problem-solving format in a non-testing situation in order to accommodate valuable participant interaction during the process. When used as a teaching technique, participants were asked to work through a problem in small groups. The technique was used in a federally-funded Right to Read Program to train new directors (administrators and teachers) to conduct district-wide needs assessments and write plans of action (Nichols, 1979a). It was also used to train experienced directors in updating building-level needs assessments (Nichols, 1979b).

It was also felt that this problem-solving technique could be used with undergraduate students and so it was used with education majors who minor in reading at Metropolitan State College. The reading minor sequence of courses requires completion

of two three-hour basic reading theory courses prior to a three-semester-hour practicum. During the practicum students teach developmental reading under the supervision of classroom teachers. It was felt that the Tab Item technique would give students the opportunity to apply their knowledge in a less threatening environment before they began their practicum. It was hoped this activity would make the students more comfortable with their first attempt to apply their knowledge in a classroom and that it would give the college instructor insight as to which students would need closer supervision and more guidance during the practicum.

The development of the format of the problem-solving activity came from information described above. The activity centered around a hypothetical fourth grade teaching position which opened midyear. The college students were told they had been hired in December to fill the position. The newly hired "teacher" met with the "principal" and found the "principal" was dissatisfied with the reading progress made under the "teacher" being replaced. The "principal" expected some immediate improvements in the situation in the "classroom."

The newly hired "teacher" had one week to work in the classroom, visit with the "principal," and look over records. During this time this "teacher" had to determine how to strengthen the reading instruction in this hypothetical classroom.

The 21 undergraduate reading minor students who participated in this activity were divided into small groups and were given verbal and written directions on how to proceed. The steps were as follows:

1. Decide, as a group, what information needed to be gathered.
2. Gather the information (come up to the administrator of the activity and ask for the information). There were 22 different pieces of information available to the college students. The items covered testing results, attitudes of parents and students, school/home contact, availability of resources, and the reading program in the hypothetical classroom.
3. Discuss the information.
4. Decide, as a group, what were the implications of the information.

The procedure continued with the groups' deciding on the next piece of information until all the desired information had been collected and a plan developed. This ended the group activity.

Next, individual students received a set of questions to answer. The questions asked about specific hypothetical students in the "classroom" whose reading needs had not been met adequately by the previous "teacher." Students were asked to comment briefly on tentative plans for the hypothetical students. Next, they were asked to list weaknesses in the "reading program" and, finally, outline a plan for strengthening the "program."

A class discussion followed and the college students discussed each part of the questionnaire with direction and input from the college instructor.

The problem-solving activity came about as the result of a desire to bridge the gap between the two theory classes and the reading practicum. The project was not intended to be research oriented; therefore, evaluation was conducted informally by assessing the reactions of the students and by observing the process in order to confirm or reject the value of the idea.

Students' reactions were positive. Eighteen students wrote anonymous comments after completing the exercise. All 18 expressed favorable reactions to the experience. The most repeated comment expressed a heightened sense of their own competence in utilizing the resources they had accumulated from the two reading theory classes. They also reported gaining a feeling of confidence about entering the classroom which resulted from a demonstrable application of knowledge.

Selected student comments included:

This simulation type of activity was very helpful. It was a question that has been on my mind for weeks as I approach graduation--"what will I do when I am handed a classroom assignment?" This activity helped me to define some steps I always knew I would take but was never made to really think about it. I wanted to go on--to make some decisions and plans. It was extremely helpful.

I thought this exercise was excellent. When it was first presented I thought it sounded impossible. I didn't know where to start; it was kind of frightening. As I started gathering materials, more and more ideas came into mind and by the time I was through I was ready to jump into the fourth grade class and start.

The hypothetical problem-solving task was thought-provoking. It seems we, as prospective teachers, are not often asked to apply knowledge of theory and/or process. This type of learning activity seems to be extremely valuable.

This activity was good experience for us. Problem-solving is not done very much at all in Metro classes and yet it is so important.

It was interesting to make practical use of the information we've learned through the education program. It required thinking, not just memorization and low level stuff.

From observation of the process the following conclusions could be drawn:

1. The experience promoted interaction among the participants. Students were enthusiastic in their efforts to solve the problem. They were eager to discuss the information gathered and were active in their efforts to interact with one another.
2. Participation in the activity gave participants the opportunity to apply knowledge while still in the college classroom.
3. The class discussion gave the college instructor the opportunity to give guidance in the application of theory in a training situation prior to entry into an actual classroom.
4. Students gained confidence in their ability to teach reading.
5. Anxiety about entry into the classroom as a reading teacher was reduced.

One final point should be mentioned. The students were reluctant to stop the collection of information and begin the process of using the information to develop a plan. They had, however, gathered a significant amount of relevant information and the time constraints of the two-hour seminar forced the administrator to insist that each student begin work on the individual questionnaire and the plan of action for improvement of the "program." Originally, this was viewed as a weakness of the instrument when used in a two-hour time block. However, after the class discussion and a review of the students' plans of action, it was found that the students did not need any more information in order to make good decisions regarding the hypothetical class. The students' reluctance to take action came at the point where

theory had to be applied and decisions made. Shortly after being told no more information could be gathered, the students became deeply involved in making notes and developing plans. It was felt that the students were hesitant to start the application of theory to practice. Once forced beyond this point, they had begun the process of using theory and, thus, had started to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

The quality of the students' plans for strengthening the hypothetical reading program, the assurance with which the students presented their suggestions for improvement, and their written and verbal expression of newly gained confidence indicated the problem-solving experience had satisfied its purpose. The authors feel that the Tab Item modification is an approach which can assist students in bridging the gap between theory and practice. Further research is needed to determine if the Tab Item technique leads to more effective use of teaching strategies in the classroom.

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